DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 244 291 CS 208 339

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TITLE A Self-Paced Program in Freshman Composition.
PUB DATE 7 Oct 83
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southwest Regional Conference on English in the Two-Year College (Bossier City, LA, October 6-8, 1983).
PJB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Autoinstructional Aids; College English; College Freshmen; *English Instruction; *Independent Study; *Programed Instruction; Two Year Colleges; Two Year College Students; Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Freshman Composition

ABSTRACT

Developed in response to the heterogenous student population of a two-year, open door college, a self-paced freshman English course at Brazosport College (Texas) still operates within the traditional contact hour and three semester hours credit requirements, but serves students in unique, individual ways. Students may enroll only if placed by diagnostic writing and grammar tests. They spend one to three hours a week in an instructional resource center with individual study carrels where they may listen to taped lectures that accompany the texts, all of which are prepared by the English faculty. Students must also spend two hours weekly in a writing laboratory, which is a conventional classroom where a teacher works with 15 students or less. They are also required to complete weekly self-instruction units in grammar and to take departmental rhetoric exams and a final. The final provides a link to the following semester by combining objective questions on rhetoric with essay questions on an assigned literary work. Final grades are assigned on the basis of predetermined criteria. Additionally, later grades are weighed more heavily if a student raises his level of performance. Consistency in evaluation, as well as consistency in instructional materials and writing assignments, is therefore maintained while still allowing instructors to grade on improvement. (CRH)

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# A Self-Paced Program in Freshman Composition

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Friday, October 7, 1983

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A Self-Paced Program in Freshman Composition

To meet the needs of the hetereogenous group of students who enter our two-year, open-door community college, the English faculty at Brazosport College has developed a self-paced, first semester freshman English program that operates within the traditional "contact hour" and "three-semester hours" credit requirement and serves our students in a unique, individual way. English 133: Composition and Rhetoric I is structured so that students spend one to three hours a week in the Instructional Resource Center and two hours a week in a writing laboratory with a teacher. The Instructional Resource Center (the IRC) is an audio-tutorial media center with individual study carels equipped with cassette players with head phones; the writing labs are conventional classrooms in which the teacher works with no more than fifteen students in two, regularly-scheduled, traditional fifty minute periods for day classes (Monday-Wednesday, Tuesday-Thursday, or Wednesday-Friday) or for a two-hour block for evening classes, which meet only once a week.

The textbooks used in Composition and Rhetoric I have been written by the English faculty at Brazosport College. The textbooks are accompanied by taped lectures also prepared by the English faculty. The first text, English 133 Rhetoric Units, is made up of eleven lessons which discuss specific rhetorical modes and strategies. Each unit also includes writing models for students to follow. The eleven rhetoric units cover the full range of the standard forms of writing; the major emphasis, however, is on exposition. The students study six units on exposition--short comparison, contrast, and analogy; extended comparison, contrast, and analogy and introductory and concluding paragraphs; process and causal analysis; and classification and definition. Three units on argumentation include a special unit on critical thinking and sound reasoning and units on inductive and deductive argument. Narration and description round out and conclude the rhetoric units text. The second text, English 133 Self-Instructional Units, contains one hundred

self-paced units on everything from the eight parts of speech to fragments and comma splices and subject-verb agreement to problems in punctuation, style, diction, and unorthodox spelling. In addition to the "in-house" texts, the Harbrace College Handbook, ninth edition, is used as a basic reference text and guide to rules and conventions and for paper correction.

The Rhetoric Units lessons are assigned weekly in the order that they are listed above. The self-instructional units are assigned based on the results of our in-house English 133 Diagnostic Test. Each of the 100 items on the test corresponds to a particular problem or common error; students are instructed to mark the letter of the error in the sentences. For example, item 19 tests students' ability to recognize a subject-verb agreement error when correlatives join a compound subject, one singular, the other plural, as illustrated below:

19. Either the students (a) or a teacher show (b) visitors around (c) the school. no error (d)

If a student fails to mark b on his answer sheet, he is assigned Self-Instructional Unit 19. Unit 19 and all other self-instructional units are accompanied by a taped instructional lecture and all answers to practice exercises and mastery tests at the end of the unit. Students are tested on the self-instructional units in groups of twenty-five on a regularly-scheduled basis in the writing labs throughout the semester; the Self-Instructional Units Tests average counts one-eighth of the semester grade.

The semester's work in Composition and Rhetoric I is logically and coherently organized. After the initial diagnostic work, which includes not only the 100-item Diagnostic Test but a writing sample, as well, students whose skills seem below entry level in Composition and Rhetoric I are counseled to drop down to an English

Fundamentals course. (Generally, students whose ACT scores are below 16 in English are counseled not to sign up for Composition and Rhetoric I to begin with; those without ACT scores are given the Nelson-Denny Reading Composition Test, Form B, a grammar test, and a diagnostic writing test to determine if they should register for Composition and Rhetoric I or developmental reading or English fundamentals.) An orientation session is conducted in the IRC; students are shown sign-out logs, tape locations, and procedures for using the cassette players. Following this, the semester's work begins in earnest and follows the schedule below:

Week 2: Short Comparison, Contrast, or Analogy (one paragraph)
Week 3: Extended Comparison, Contrast, or Analogy Essay (five paragraphs)
Week 4: Process Analysis (five paragraphs)
Week 5: Rhetoric Exam 1 on Units 1-3 and Self-Instructional Units 1-25 Test
Week 6: Causal Analysis (five paragraphs)
Week 7: Classification (one paragraph)
Week 8: Definition (one paragraph) and Rhetoric Exam 2 on Units 4-6 and Self-Instructional Units 26-50 Test
Weeks 9 & 10: Critical Thinking and Inductive Argument (five paragraphs)
Week 11: Deductive Argument (one paragraph) and Rhetoric Exam 3 (on Critical Thinking and Inductive and Deductive Argument) and Self-Instructional Units 51-75 Test
Week 12: Narration (300 words)
Week 13: Description (one paragraph) and Rhetoric Exam 4 (on Narration and Description) and Self-Instructional Units 76-100 Test
Weeks 14 & 15: Discussion of Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee's Inherit the Wind and review of rhetorical strategies for final examination; final examination.

All Rhetoric Exams consist of thirty-three objective questions; these exams are departmental exams and are the cooperative effort of all Composition and Rhetoric I teachers. The final exam, which will be described below, is also a departmental test.

To complete the rigorous schedule outlined above requires a well-organized weekly routine that can be divided into four phases.

Phase One: Before Writing Lab Session

1. Students listen to assigned rhetoric unit in the IRC. (IRC Hours are 8 a.m. - 9:00 p.m. Monday-Thursday and

8 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. on Friday; it is not open on the weekend, nor are students allowed to check out rhetoric or self-instructional units tapes.)

2. Students choose and limit a topic, formulate a topic or thesis sentence (depending on the week's lesson and assignment, e.g., short comparison or contrast paragraph or a five-paragraph essay), and construct a topic outline.
3. Graded compositions returned to students are corrected and bound in personal folders.
4. Students listen to assigned self-instructional units in groups of twenty-five (e.g., Units 1-25 through weeks 2-4).

Phase Two: Writing Lab Session One (Monday of MW, Tuesday of TT, Wednesday of WF classes, or first hour of evening class)

1. Short, ten-item multiple-choice quiz on the assigned rhetoric unit. (No make-up is allowed on weekly quizzes, but two of the twelve quiz grades are dropped; weekly quiz average counts as a fifth major test grade.) While students complete the quiz, the teacher checks the assigned topic sentences or theses and outlines.
2. Brief comments on rhetorical strategies discussed in rhetoric unit and taped lecture; discussion of writing models and evaluation criteria for the writing assignment based on six standards: 1. significant purpose, 2. supporting evidence, 3. organization and transitions, 4. sentence structure, 5. diction, and 6. mechanics.
3. Students, with teacher's individual assistance, work on writing rough draft of week's writing assignment.

Phase Three: Between Writing Lab Sessions

1. Students complete rough draft of week's assignment.
2. Students continue work on self-instructional units.
3. Teacher sees students individually during posted office hours or by appointment to assist in completion of the rough drafts.

Phase Four: Writing Lab Session Two (Wednesday of MW, Thursday of TT, Friday of WF classes, or second hour of evening class).

1. Rough drafts are individually checked; errors are noted in the margins of rough drafts using correction symbols from the Harbrace College Handbook; for example "12a" indicates the omission of a comma between the main clauses of a compound sentence joined by a coordinate conjunction. The number and letter both identify the error and direct the student to the specific section of the Harbrace College Handbook in which correction of the error is discussed.
2. Students polish and recopy papers and submit papers at the end of the lab session or at a reasonable time thereafter; students whose rough drafts are checked near the end of the lab sessions or whose rough drafts require major revisions are allowed until the following morning in day classes and until later on in the week for night classes to submit their

papers. The teacher's office is readily accessible throughout all hours, day and night, that the college is open so that students may submit their papers.

3. If students have any lab time remaining after they have turned in their papers, they are released to work in the IRC, either to listen to the next rhetoric unit or to self-instructional units.

Since all teachers of Composition and Rhetoric I have had an active role in planning and implementing the course, the instruction in all sections is consistent, and all students write the same number and types of papers. The students have the additional advantage of listening to the same lectures and re-listening wholly or in part to the more difficult lectures at their own convenience and pace.

Consistency in evaluating the students, as well as consistency in instructional materials and writing assignments, is another advantage of the self-paced Composition and Rhetoric I course at Brazosport College. Every student who completes Composition and Rhetoric I receives a grade based on the following, predetermined criteria:

1/8 Self-Instructional Tests average
1/8 Paragraph average

1/4 Longer essay average

1/4 Rhetoric Exams average

1/4 Final examination

In addition, our introductory materials for Composition and Rhetoric I include the following statement: "If a student raises his level of performance, his latter grades will be weighted more heavily than his former ones." Therefore, each teacher has some flexibility in determining a student's grade and rewarding progress and achievement.

The semester's work concludes in Composition and Rhetoric I in a conventional reading and discussion of Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee's Inherit the Wind

(New York: Bantam Books, 1955). This study serves two important purposes: it provides a content for students to apply and demonstrate rhetorical strategies studied during the semester on the final exam; and it provides, after the study of narration, a transitional bridge to the next semester of freshman English, Composition and Rhetoric II, introduction to creative literature, in which the emphasis is on writing about literature (fiction, poetry, and drama, and a literary research or "library paper"). Final exam essay questions are on Inherit the Wind. Students are given seven essay questions before they read Inherit the Wind; three of the seven questions are the questions that will be on the final exam, each of them counting twenty-five points. For example, students are asked to answer the following question:

> Comparison, Contrast, Comparison-Contrast. Write a well-developed paragraph comparing and/or contrasting one of the following sets of characters.
>
> a. Drummond-Brady
> b. Rachel-Cates
> c. Hornbeck-Rev. Brown
> d. Hornbeck-Drummond
> e. Rachel-Rev. Brown
> f. Cates-Drummond
> g. Brady-Rev. Brown

Emphasis in evaluating the students' responses is placed, as it is throughout the semester, on six evaluation standards: significant purpose, supporting evidence, organization and transitions, sentence structure, diction, and mechanics. In preparing students for the final exam, teachers stress the importance of demonstrating competently the command of the specific rhetorical modes and composition skills practiced throughout the semester. To round out the exam, twenty-five objective questions counting one point each (sixteen questions on the rhetoric units and nine on the self-instructional units) are included on the final exam. The final exam, as are all the major tests, is a departmental examination.

The English Department of Brazosport College has worked with the self-paced Composition and Rhetoric I for a little over ten years; the program is reviewed and revised each year to upgrade the "in-house" texts and to meet more effectively

the needs of the students who enter our institution. The program provides individual attention and quality "hands on" instruction and learning. Composition and Rhetoric I is Brazosport College's response to the needs of the community it serves. More importantly, the Composition and Rhetoric I self-paced freshman composition program is firmly based on the belief that writing is not the exclusive domain of intellectuals, scholars, or academicians; writing competently is within the grasp of all students of average intelligence and certainly within the grasp of the students who enter the open doors of Brazosport College.